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ABSTRACT

This is the first in a series of reports on a national study of college students' spiritual development currently being conducted at the Higher Education Research Institute. The results are derived from a sample of 3,680 undergraduates attending 46 diverse colleges and universities across the United States. Each student completed a specially designed followup questionnaire in spring 2003 (the junior year in college) in addition to an extensive survey when they first entered college 3 years earlier. Substantial numbers of third-year undergraduates express a strong interest in spiritual matters. More than half place a high value on "integrating spirituality into my life" and more than two-thirds report that they have had a spiritual experience. Three-fourths believe that "we are all spiritual beings." Only 12% said that they did not consider themselves to be on a spiritual quest. In spite of this high degree of personal religious commitment, most students also demonstrate a substantial degree of religious tolerance and acceptance of nonbelievers. About one student in five evidences a high degree of religious and spiritual skepticism, but most students appear to have achieved a relatively high level of "spiritual equanimity." (SLD)

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# Spirituality in College Students: Preliminary Findings from a National Study[1]

## Conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute
University of California, Los Angeles

This is the first in a series of reports on a national study of college students' spiritual development currently being conducted at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). The results are derived from a sample of 3,680 undergraduates attending 46 diverse colleges and universities across the country. Each student completed a specially designed follow up questionnaire in the Spring of 2003 (during their junior year in college), as well as an extensive survey when they first entered college as freshmen three years earlier in the fall of 2000. (Further details concerning the sample, survey instruments, and methodology are provided in Tabs B and C and in the attached Appendix.)

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### A Quick Overview

- Substantial numbers of third-year college undergraduates express a strong interest in spiritual matters. Over half of all students place a high value on "integrating spirituality into my life" and more than two-thirds report that they have had a spiritual experience. Three-fourths of the students believe that "we are all spiritual beings." Some representative results:

  *We are all spiritual beings* (77% agree)
  *People can reach a higher plane of spiritual consciousness through meditation or prayer* (72% agree)

  Rated "essential" or "very important":
  *Integrating spirituality into my life* (58%)
  *Seeking opportunities to grow spiritually* (40%)

  Describes me "to a great extent":
  *Believing in the sacredness of life* (51%)
  *Having an interest in spirituality* (41%)

  Rates self "above average" in *Spirituality* (39%)
  *I do not consider myself to be on a spiritual quest* (12%)

  Have had a "spiritual" experience while:
  *Witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature* (73%)
  *Listening to beautiful music* (64%)
  *Viewing a great work of art* (36%)
  *Participating in a musical or artistic performance* (34%)
  *Engaging in athletics* (30%)
  *Meditating* (30%)

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- More than two-thirds of third-year undergraduate students demonstrate a substantial level of religious engagement and commitment, as evidenced by the following responses:
  - *Do you pray?* (yes = 77%)
  - *Attended religious services during the past year* (70%)
  - *Discussed religion/spirituality with friends* (78%)

  My religious/spiritual beliefs:
  - *Have helped me develop my identity* (73%)
  - *Provide me with strength, support, and guidance* (74%)
  - *Give meaning/purpose to my life* (67%)
  - *I find religion to be personally helpful* (71%)
  - *I gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power* (71%)

- Despite this high rate of personal religious commitment, most students also demonstrate a substantial degree of religious tolerance and acceptance of non-believers:
  - *Non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious people* (88% agree)
  - *Most people can grow spiritually without being religious* (70% agree)

- About one student in five evidences a high degree of religious/spiritual skepticism:
  - *Believing in supernatural phenomena is foolish* (22% agree)
  - *In the future, science will be able to explain everything* (21% agree)
  - *The universe arose by chance* (19% agree)
  - *Whether or not there is a Supreme Being is a matter of indifference to me* (27% agree)
  - *I have never felt a sense of sacredness* (24% agree)
  - *It is futile to try to discover the purpose of existence* (31% agree)

- Many students appear to have achieved a relatively high level of "spiritual equanimity":
  - *Frequently been able to find meaning in times of hardship* (31%)
  - *Frequently felt at peace/centered* (29%)

  The following describes me "to a great extent":
  - *Being thankful to God for all that has happened to me* (66%)
  - *Believing in the sacredness of life* (51%)
  - *Feeling good about the direction in which my life is headed* (50%)
  - *Seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift* (46%)

- Substantial numbers of students rate themselves at least "above average" on various "spiritual" qualities:
  - *Compassion* (74%)
  - *Kindness* (74%)
  - *Helpfulness* (71%)
  - *Generosity* (62%)
  - *Forgiveness* (59%)
  - *Empathy* (57%)

- Many students also appear to be actively engaged in a spiritual "quest":

"Essential" or "Very Important" goals in life:

*Attaining wisdom* (86%)
*Becoming a more loving person* (84%)
*Seeking beauty in my life* (67%)
*Attaining inner harmony* (60%)
*Developing a meaningful philosophy of life* (52%)

- To "some" or "a great" extent, I am:

  *Searching for meaning/purpose in life* (75%)
  *Having discussions with friends about the meaning of life* (69%)

- The "ultimate spiritual quest" most often selected by students is *"to become a better person"* (30%), followed by *"to know what God requires of me"* (14%), and *"to know my purpose in life"* (13%).

- Significant numbers of students are experiencing challenges and struggles in their spiritual and religious development. Two-thirds (65%) report that they question their religious/spiritual beliefs at least occasionally (18% frequently), and a similar number (68%) say that they are "feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters at least "to some extent." Three fourths (76%) of the students have "struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death" at least occasionally (21% frequently), and nearly half (46%) have at least occasionally "felt angry with God" (6% frequently). One-third (38%) of the students report feeling "disillusioned with my religious upbringing" at least "to some extent."

- While three-fourths of the students (78%) discuss religion/spirituality with friends, fewer (58%) have such discussions in class, and less than one in ten (8%) report that their professors frequently encourage classroom discussions of religious or spiritual matters or frequently provide opportunities to discuss the purpose/meaning of life. Over half of the students (62%) report that their professors *never* encourage discussions of religious/spiritual matters, and similar numbers (56%) report that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the purpose/meaning of life.

- More than one student in three (39%) reports that their religious/spiritual beliefs have been strengthened by "new ideas encountered in class," compared to 53 percent who report "no change," and 9 percent who say that their religious/spiritual beliefs have been weakened by such ideas.

- When asked how they have changed since entering college, fewer than one student in ten (9%) reports that their "religiousness" is "much stronger," and about one in eight (13%) reports that their "spirituality" is "much stronger."

**Factors Influencing Change Over Time**

The study provided several opportunities to study *change* in students' spirituality/religiousness by comparing their responses to certain questions as entering freshmen with their responses to the same questions three years later at the end of their junior year. One such question asked students to rate their degree of "spirituality" on a 5-point scale, while another asked students how important it was to "integrate spirituality into my life." According to Table 1, while there was a general trend for students to see

themselves as less spiritual with time—the percent rating themselves above average in spirituality declined from 47 to 39 between 2000 and 2003—the personal *importance* of "integrating spirituality into my life" increased: the percent reporting either "essential' or "very important" increased from 51 to 58 percent.

**Table 1. Changes in Selected Items Between 2000 and 2003**

| | | Percent | | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Correlation[a] | 2000 | 2003 | Change |
| "Frequently" attended religious services | .55 | 52.1 | 29.4 | -22.7 |
| "Above average" in spirituality (self-rating) | .53 | 46.6 | 38.9 | -7.7 |
| "Essential" or "Very important" goal: | | | | |
| Integrate spirituality into my life | .60 | 51.0 | 57.7 | 6.7 |
| Develop meaningful philosophy of life | .45 | 42.5 | 51.8 | 9.3 |
| Help others who are in difficulty | .40 | 60.2 | 74.0 | 13.8 |
| Be very well off financially | .51 | 70.6 | 63.4 | -7.2 |

[a] The correlation is between 2000 and 2003 responses to each item.

We have already noted that one of the largest changes occurring during college is the decline in church attendance. Whereas more than half of the students (52 percent) reported attending religious services frequently when they first entered college in 2000, fewer than one-third (29 percent) attended frequently during their junior year in college.

**What is Spirituality?**

The 14 items that make up the Spirituality scale are as follows: (See also "A Quick Overview," above

*We are all spiritual beings*
*People can reach a higher plane of spiritual consciousness through meditation or prayer*
*Integrating spirituality into my life*
*Seeking opportunities to grow spiritually*
*Believing in the sacredness of life*
*Having an interest in spirituality*
*Spirituality* (self-rating)
*I do not consider myself to be on a spiritual quest* (scored in reverse)

(Have had a "spiritual" experience while:)

*Witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature*
*Listening to beautiful music*
*Viewing a great work of art*
*Participating in a musical or artistic performance*
*Engaging in athletics*
*Meditating*

Another possible name for this scale would be "spiritual focus." The possible range of scores is from 14 (least spiritual) to 47 (most spiritual). (One question—"I do not consider myself to be on a spiritual quest"—was scored in reverse.) We chose a cutting

score of 36 or higher to identify students who were "highly" spiritual or who had a "strong" spiritual focus. Using this cutting point, 21 percent of the students qualify as highly spiritual. To obtain such a score, a student would, for example, have to (1) give the highest possible response to at least 3 of the first 8 items, (2) the next-to-highest response to *all* of the other 5, and (3) *average* at least "occasionally" on the final 6 items.

We chose a cutting point of 23 or lower to identify students with little or no spiritual focus. Even if a student were to give a self-rating of "average" on spirituality and mark "not at all" to *all* six "spiritual experience" items, that student would still have to *average* the next-to-lowest response on all of the other items in order to qualify as having little or no spiritual focus. This cutting point thus identifies about 16 percent of the students as having little or no spiritual focus, a figure very close to the percent we designated as scoring "high" in Religious Skepticism (15 percent). As one might expect, these two measures are strongly associated (r = -.70) in a negative direction: among religious skeptics, well over half (61 percent) score low on spirituality, while very few (1 percent) score high on spirituality.

**Other Correlates of Spirituality**

One of the most critical questions posed by this study is how spirituality affects other aspects of the student's college experience. While definitive answers to this question must await the longitudinal study planned to begin in Fall 2004 (i.e., when we will be able to study *changes* in spirituality from the point of initial entry to college), the current data enable us to gain some clues as to the possible effects of spirituality by examining the *correlates* of spirituality as revealed in the follow up survey. During the Spring 2003 meeting of the project's Technical Advisory Panel, several different theories and perspectives on spirituality were discussed and some time was devoted to brainstorming the types of relationships that *ought* to exist between spirituality and other aspects of the student's development and experience. One outcome of these deliberations was a series of preliminary hypotheses concerning expected correlates of spirituality. Below we summarize each of these hypotheses together with the relevant findings. Specifically, it was expected that spirituality should be positively associated with the following qualities:

- *Physical and psychological health, including self-esteem.*
  **Result:** mixed. Spirituality is positively associated with Self-esteem (r = .17) and self-rated physical health (r = .05), but it is also positively associated with both Psychological Distress (r = .02) and Spiritual Distress (r = .13).
- *Optimism and a sense of personal empowerment.*
  **Result:** strongly supported. Spirituality is positively associated with Equanimity (r = .55) and negatively associated with the belief that "Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society" (r = -.29).
- *Civic Responsibility*
  **Result:** strongly supported. Spirituality is positively associated with both Charitable Involvement (r = .37) and Social Activism (r = .40).
- *Empathy, understanding of/caring for others*
  **Result:** strongly supported. Spirituality is positively associated with the importance of "Reducing pain and suffering in the world" (r = .43),

"Feeling connected to all of humanity" (r = .41), and Compassionate Self-concept (r = .30). It also has positive relationships with helping others in difficulty, understanding others, believing in the goodness of all people, helping friends with personal problems, accepting others as they are, becoming a more loving person, and improving the human condition.

- *Racial/ethnic awareness and tolerance.*
  **Result:** strongly supported. Spirituality is positively related to the importance of promoting racial understanding (r = .33), attending a racial/cultural awareness workshop (r = .18), ability to get along with people of different races/cultures (r = .13), and growth in tolerance during college (r = .17).

### Spirituality and Religiousness

As many other studies have shown, there is a good deal of overlap between spirituality and religiousness. In the current study, our spirituality measure correlates .78 and .71, respectively, with Religious Commitment and Religious Engagement. While highly religious students also tend to obtain high scores on the traits listed above, highly spiritual students generally obtain somewhat higher scores, especially on Equanimity, personal empowerment, empathy, and racial/ethnic awareness.

## Methodology

This summary highlights the major findings of a study conducted among 3,680 third-year students at 46 four-year U.S. colleges and universities in April 2003. Participating students had completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) annual Survey of Entering Freshman three years earlier in the fall of 2000.

Participants were a mix of public universities, public colleges, private nonsectarian colleges, Catholic colleges and universities, and other religious colleges and universities. Results were weighted to be representative of colleges and universities nationwide. Additional information on the methodology for this study is available upon request.

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